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**Citizen Police Academy:  
Community Policing Through Education**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Many agencies of all sizes have developed and implemented a citizen police academy (CPA) to close the gap between the community and police. Despite all the research that suggest such implementations of a CPA has been successful with agencies, little research supports or disproves the cost, the time, and the risk of providing a CPA within a university police department. The goal of a CPA is to provide the community they serve with basic knowledge and exposure to police operations and procedures. The CPA is a powerful teaching tool increasing transparency between the police and community. Every university police agency should set up a CPA; there are many advantages for both the community they serve and the police department.

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## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies across the country are finding themselves searching for ways to close the gap between them and the citizens they serve. Bumphus, Gaimes and Blakely (1999) stated that “The adoption of community policing principles has led law enforcement to develop and implement programs that readily lend themselves to new proactive measures” (p. 71). With recent incidents, involving officers accused of using excessive use of force or abusing their authority, community leaders, as well as the public, are asking for transparency within the agencies.

The public has developed a misconception of what law enforcement officers do and their authority. When a serious incident occurs, the police officer and their agency are left trying to explain to a skeptical community who are too often ready to accept police brutality and lack of competence by the officer. The public is quick to make a judgment of such incidents and blame all law enforcement for the actions of a few officers. What the public does not see is when the officer is working day and night, in all weather conditions and on holidays to keep those that they serve safe.

Officers go where no other will go or do, they walk the beat, go to calls that have the potential for a violent encounter, chase a suspect into a dark alley or entering a building searching for an active shooter. The only interaction the public has with law enforcement is when they have been stopped by the police or have been a victim of a crime, which is usually viewed as a negative interaction. The public usually does not consider law enforcement officers as approachable unless there is a need for them. The public maintains an “us versus them” mentality when it comes to the law enforcement community.

One program that has shown to be successful in closing that gap is that of a citizen's police academy (CPA). Not only does the CPA give the citizens an insight of the police department, they serve to improve the relation between police and community. CPA is a mini academy conducted for citizens to provide them with basic insights (criminal investigation, patrol, narcotics, SWAT, traffic enforcement, and internal investigations) of the structure and operation of the agency. Many courses feature hands-on activities like dusting for fingerprints and trying on SWAT gear and much more. Participants also learn safety tips on simple crime prevention strategies. Citizen's academy teaches participants about public safety issues in their community. They also will get to know how community members can help in reporting a crime.

Schafer (2002) stated that "at the heart of the philosophy of community policing is collaboration, communication, and interaction between the police and the community they serve" (para. 2). A citizen police academy does not give any arresting powers to the attendees after completion of the course but it will provide them with the inner working of the police department. Citizen police "academy classes are designed to provide students with a basic understanding of the structure and operations of the sponsoring agency and to demonstrate the complex nature of policing and law in contemporary society" (Schafer & Bonello, 2001, p. 435). They will view media reports and the complex nature of policing differently after attending the academy. Better informed citizens become supportive towards the agency. Supportive citizens will be more willing to come forward and assist with issues or crime reporting. Research shows that "The Orlando CPA (1985) was the first in the United States, although the idea was borrowed from the British, who established their Police Night School in 1977"

(Brester, Stoloff, & Sanders, 2005, p. 22). In 1986, the first citizen police academy was conducted in Texas by the Missouri City Police Department. Professor Greenberg (1991) stated that “The program success resulted in the expansion of the academy to 11 evening sessions and the incorporation of firearms practice and safety training” (p. 11).

Depending on the size of the agency, CPA's will range from 9-16 weeks. Most agencies do not charge to attend and target those citizens that are interested in learning more about the hosting agency. Instructors are usually officers within the agency or local district attorneys who will instruct a specific field of policing. Classes are generally held once a week and provide comprehensive training for police operations, and practices. According to Aryani, Garrett, and Alsabrook (2000), “All agencies reported improved relations with citizens, leading to the realization that the benefits outweigh the cost” (p. 21). Those that graduate the CPA will share their experience with their friends, co-workers, and neighbors. Most CPA graduate will become involved with a Citizen's Police Academy Alumni (CPAA). Law enforcement agencies should adopt a citizen's police academy to close the gap between police and community relationship by providing the citizens with exposure to police operations, procedure, and policies. Many graduates will become supportive of the agencies and will show support for the agencies in front of city leaders when issues arise regarding the agency.

## **POSITION**

Citizen's police academy will give the public an opportunity to experience firsthand the police operations. Citizen will explore the inner working of the agencies, the policies and procedures and mission. Since public perception is usually tainted by

media and TV shows depicting tactics and science that is fiction to solve a crime. Given such tactics, one should not be surprised that the public expects law enforcement officers to shoot the legs out from under an offender or gently use restraint to make an effective arrest when dealing with the violent offender. The public is quick to accept police brutality and incompetence when the use of force was used in a serious incident, leaving law enforcement official with the task to explain the officer(s) actions.

Participants will discuss organizational structure and receive hands-on operations. Participants will also see that “Understanding and cooperating with citizens is vital for effective police-community relations. Citizen police academy bridges the gap between the citizens and the police”(Maffe & Burke, 1999, p. 77). The community will become sources to the police as they become familiar with crime patterns and behavior. Graduates will go back and tell their friends and neighbors of the program and get them involved too. Maffe and Burke (1999) stated that “Participants gain a better understanding of the procedures, responsibilities, guidelines, demands of personnel and the policies and laws that guide decision making” (p. 77). It is the agency’s goal that the student will see officers as individuals and develop positive views of them and the agency. The graduate is expected to develop a sense of goodwill towards the agency and will support the organization. Graduates may also become involved and support other department initiated community programs hosted by the agency. Many graduates of a CPA have said to view the police department differently after going through the academy. Research shows that those students that attended the academy with a positive view before starting, finished the academy with a more positive view.

Participants also indicated that their views on selected police issues had changed in a positive way.

For the law enforcement agency, CPA's will give an avenue to learn from the community and their concerns. The adoption on community policing principles has led to the implementation of other community program such citizens on patrol. This will allow the police department to address certain areas or trend of crime with the attendee's and receive feedback from them, problem-solving approach. In a research conducted by Bumphus, Gaines, and Blakely (1999), they stated "It becomes critical for researchers and practitioners to understand the connection between good community relations and greater effectiveness in crime deterrence, control, and apprehension" (p. 69). CPA's will give the public a close encounter with those that patrol their area and open up a channel of communication with them. CPA's "participants should be more capable of entering into a partnership with the host agency because of their heightened awareness of police problems" (Jordan, 2000, p. 94). By inviting and encouraging those in positions that make decisions on budget and purchasing, this will give them an opportunity to understand and see why such request are being made and their needs within the agency. According to Barlow (2009), "Not only can they be strong allies during difficult times and lean budget years, but they are fantastic volunteer base" (para. 2). Citizen awareness of the police and police awareness of its citizens establishes a positive and proactive contact. An "exchange of ideas and different views helps to dispel suspicious and misconceptions" (Maffe & Burke, 1999, p .78). Working with the citizens through a police academy will allow the citizens to know that the agency is being transparent with their operation and is not hiding anything. When "using a variety of



teaching mediums (lectures, discussions, role-playing and field observation) agencies endeavor to provide participants with an inside perspective on the organization and officers protecting them” (Schafer & Bonello, 2001, p. 435). Most citizens always criticize the police department because they feel that the agency is not telling the truth or hiding the facts from the public. So it is important that the citizens receive first hand view of duties of law enforcement practices. In doing so it will build a mutual trusting atmosphere and will give the perception of transparency.

The foundation of a citizen police academy is “Creating cooperation and mutual trust between citizens and police officers reduces suspicious and misconception” (Aryani, Garrett, & Alsabrook, 2000, p. 19). By hosting a CPA the citizens will be able to communicate with those officers that will instruct the course and build a trusting bond. Police officers will reap the benefits by fewer citizens complaints, lawsuits, jury trials and better public perception. Additionally, there should be fewer crime reports and offenses against person or property. CPA graduates have said “The positive teaching experience and the sharing of common concerns between officers and the citizens has helped curtail the us-versus-them mentality often found embedded in the police culture” (Aryani, Garrett, & Alsabrook, 2000, p. 20). Graduates showed a greater appreciation of the officers and their work. CPA graduates also indicated that their perception of the training the officers went through was adequate and technical. CPA participants also changed their view and believed those police officers had legal right to use force under certain circumstances after going through the academy.

## COUNTER POSITION

Barlow (2009) states with the creation of any new program agencies must consider the challenges, “these challenges include securing funding to facilitate such a program, establishing the availability of instructors, and having a sufficient level of interest from citizens to justify the program” (para. 3). With budget cuts and training funds not readily available, agencies have to justify such program they provide with the available fund that they currently have. Most small agencies do not have the facility or the resources to host such program or having the sufficient level of interest from citizens to justify the program. According to Schafer and Bonello (2001), “Agencies typically operate two sessions of the academy per year, serving an average of 27 students in each session, with a mean cost of \$3,500, including personnel cost” (p. 435).

Freeman (2011) interviewed Waukesha, Wisconsin Police Captain Ron Oremus, who said, “Citizen police academy is a program where the benefits clearly outweigh the cost, although some of the instructors get paid overtime to teach a portion of the class, it is still worthwhile in these tough economic times” (p. 6). Most of the instructors are either salary or they will volunteer their time. Other ways of offsetting the cost are by requesting for donations from civic groups or through fundraisers. Some agencies are sharing the task of hosting a CPA by teaming up together and sharing the responsibility. For smaller agencies, partnering up with other small agencies within their county is usually the only answer for these challenges. Implementing a CPA is the achievable goal regardless of the size of the agency. This clearly can be a win-win situation for all participating agencies.

Research indicated agencies rarely target participants who would have begun the program with a negative perception of the agency and targeted those that already had a positive view; therefore, not making an impact on those they needed to. According to Bonello and Schafer (2002), “even if these citizens had not participated in the CPA program, they likely would hold a positive view of the agency, would volunteer to support police programs and would be supporters of the department within the community” (p. 22). Very little is being done to suggest that CPA are having an impact on those citizens that did not already hold the organization in high regard. Often, an agency will conduct criminal history checks on participants and will exclude citizens who have committed minor offenses. Some of those excluded were not involved in any criminal activity for some time and could bring important perspectives to the program. For agencies strengthening community alliances, “reaching out to citizens who are distrustful or skeptical of law enforcement and inviting them to take a closer look at police operation can prove intimidating and unpleasant, but the rewards for doing so may be worth the effort” (Bonello & Schaffere, 2002, p. 23). When an agency is “building community partnerships, especially in areas where the police have poor relations, it would seem that the police would take every opportunity to involve marginalized citizens” (Bumphus, Gaines, & Blakely, 1999, p. 71). By not allowing those citizens with minor arrest may indicate a lack of the total representative from all community members. Some CPA also has guideline indicating a minimum age of 21 to participate in their academy; indicating that they are not willing to engage with the younger community and missing out on building a channel to reach out to them and form a foundation upon which to make sound future decisions.

Agencies tend to offer academies for teens and senior academies that can't attend the citizen police academy. The reason for this is that the normal CPA will offer gun range time which teens will not be able to attend. They also offer information that is graphic in nature, which is not suitable for teens. For agencies "to minimize the danger of misuse of information, agencies must conduct a thorough background investigation on each participant." (Maffe & Burke, 1999 p.79). Some gang members have attempted to participate in a CPA program to learn procedures of the agency for gang benefit.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Law enforcement agencies should adopt a citizen police academy to create a working police-community relationship. A citizen police academy not only benefits the hosting agency but also the community they serve. This will give the community the opportunity to see how the police department actually works and not see police work through the eyes of the media. With so many television shows that involve police and police investigations, the media creates a misconception on how police work is done. In order to better serve the public, agencies must understand their community needs to create a working relation with them. A citizen police academy closes the gap between the police and citizens. This insight will foster a sense of goodwill between the community and the hosting agency. The interaction with a police officer will allow the attendees to develop positive views. Ideally, students will come to see the agency as a professional organization. Exchanging ideas between the instructor (police officer) and citizens helps diminish the misconceptions and theories of police tactics. Officers also benefit by the informed citizens by reducing complaints and lawsuits. Many CPA graduates had an appreciation of the task and technical training that officers endure on

a daily basis. Female officers were also looked different by CPA's graduates after attending the academy; they felt that the female officers performed as well as male officers.

Agencies should consider a "citizen police academies are not without limitations, a lack of resources may make an academy prohibitive for some agencies, particularly those who barely have enough money to provide their own officers with proper training and equipment" (Maffe & Burke, 1999, p. 79). Providing the salary and service that are required to successfully operate such program can strain the already limited training budget.

Training officers are known to donate their own time to teach a certain area of the CPA to allow agencies to hold such programs. Other agencies have also teamed up together and hosted a joint CPA, which they can split the cost for hosting. The hosting agency has also reached out to civic groups for donation to support CPA. Citizens Police Academy Alumni have also raised money through fundraisers to help support the continuation of CPA's. The benefits of hosting CPA outweigh the cost in the long run.

The specific outcome of hosting a CPA depends on the citizens they attract. If they truly were looking for a diverse group to educate, they should allow those with minor arrest records to participate in such programs. Reaching out to the citizens in low income and the minority in the community will increase the awareness and decrease the mistrust of those citizens. For agencies that are "welcoming minority citizens into the academy and opening themselves to some difficult discussion on issues like racial profiling and use of force, police will be making an investment in a stronger community

relationship that will withstand the corrosive effect of a high profile incident” (Rahtz, 2005, p. 49).

Attendees are told numerous times throughout the CPA training that they are not being trained to be police officers or have any authority powers after the academy, however, they will get provided with a basic understanding of the structure and operations of the agency. The attendees will have the opportunity to experience why police officers make certain decision to handle certain situations. The purpose of the CPA's is to make citizens view officer's conduct as being driven by acceptable motives rather than inappropriate biases. Ideally, sponsoring agencies primary purpose is to educate the public, establish a positive relation and to enhance the public's image of the agency.

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